

Sermon: Children of Zebedee

Year B, Proper 24

[Job 38:1-7, 34-41; Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35c; Isaiah 53:4-12; Psalm 9:9-16; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45](#)

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OK, I know we have sung about surrendering to God, about lifting God's name on high, about bowing down to God. I know you all well enough to know that none of you think of yourselves as perfect Christians. I know all of you have days when you feel closer to the person God is calling you to be than others.

But on your worst day, in your most unchristian moment, you have not just heard the man you abandoned your father's nets for, the man you have walked all over Israel for, the man you are risking the fury of the authorities for, you have not just heard your teacher tell you about going to Jerusalem, being mocked and flogged and killed (Mark 10:34). You have not just heard that, *for the third time*, and then said, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." (Mark 10:35). On your worst day you have not done that. And when your teacher said, "Dude, what is it you want?" you did not ask for the best seats in the house. You might have thought about it, you might have wanted the best seat, but if nothing else, you guys are more subtle than that. So no matter what else happens, you can remind yourselves, "Hey, at least we're not children of Zebedee."

There are times when we read passages from the Bible and I have to explain how something that seems strange to us would be perfectly normal back then. But what James and John did, that was rude. It's rude now. It was rude back then. When Matthew tells the same story, he was so appalled by the sons of Zebedee, that he has their mother ask for them to get the best seats (Matthew 20:20). Apparently it's more acceptable to be a pushy and ambitious mother.

Job also demands that God do what Job wants. Job's world has completely fallen apart. He's lost his possessions, his children, his health. His friends have shown up to help him figure out what he did wrong so he can apologize to God and get back to the life he's known. It's just that Job hasn't done anything wrong. And no matter how many so-called friends show up and insist that there must be something, there just isn't anything to find. So Job wants to take God to court for being so unfair. It never says exactly what Job expects, but I'm guessing a conversation with God was not on the list. Basically God tells him, "you do not know what you are asking." (Mark 10:38). God picks a few examples of what God does: decide how big the world will be, create the space the world hangs in, control the rains, create the ecosystems that feed the lions and ravens. God wants to know where Job gets the nerve to tell God that God is doing a substandard job, that God should be doing what Job tells him to do. God is very clear that no human is capable of seeing the complexity of the real world, so complaining about unfairness when you can't see the whole picture is nothing but folly. God is altogether lovely, just like we sang, but part of why we bow down is because we can't get the whole picture.

Jesus knows James and John don't understand. He says as much. He asks them if they are willing to drink from the cup he drinks from and share in his baptism (Mark 10:38). There's some lovely use of language here. A "cup" can be a cup of blessing, right, *my cup runneth over* (Psalm 23:5) from Psalm 23 that we recite in worship from time to time. Or it can be a cup of challenge, like when Jesus is in the garden at Gethsemane the night before his crucifixion and

asks God to take this cup from him (Luke 22:42). The word “baptism” in Greek in other contexts means “submerged,” like a ship wreck, but it can also be submerged the way a spendthrift is submerged in debt or an alcoholic in liquor.¹ Jesus asks James and John if they are able to share his cup and his baptism, and they say “Absolutely.” Giving James and John the benefit of the doubt, I can imagine that they are saying “yes” to the cup of blessing and to being submerged in the life where they are surrounded by crowds who adore them. If that’s where your head is at, it almost makes sense to ask for the best seats. Although it’s still pretty rude the way they asked. At least we’re not children of Zebedee.

But why would they take the happy interpretation of “cup” and “baptism” when Jesus has just said *‘See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; (Mark 10:33-34)?* Jesus and James and John and the rest of them are headed to Jerusalem. It’s not for a pilgrimage, where they’d go, perform their religious obligations and return home.² It’s for Jesus’ passion, for his death. He may not know exactly what form of death awaits him there, but he knows it’s coming. Today’s reading opened with Jesus walking ahead of the disciples on the Jerusalem road (Mark 10:32). They are behind him. And they are afraid. (Mark 10:32)

They’re afraid. Fear makes us do all kinds of foolish things. Fear blinds us to reality and closes our ears to what someone is really saying. That’s why it’s always a good idea to take someone along when you have a serious medical appointment. You need someone not caught in the same fear as you are. In this moment of fear and misunderstanding, Jesus offers them a way out of their fear. Jesus exchanges (another word for ransom (Mark 10:45)) their lives of fear for his life of service. Jesus explains that to be great you must be a servant, to be first among them must be a slave.

We too have fear in our lives. Fear that we will end up with cancer, or lose our children. Fear that we’ll run out of money in our retirement. Fear that our faith will disappear in the wider culture without a trace. And we act out of that fear, trying to take actions that give us some control, gain dominance over the stuff that frightens us. We may be blinded by that fear, we may be hearing what we want to hear. We may be children of Zebedee more than we want to admit.

Even in our fear, we know that being asked to share Jesus’ cup and Jesus’ baptism is not necessarily sharing in happy things. Because Jesus is still asking if we will share in his cup, share in his baptism. Unlike James and John on the Jerusalem road, we know how their journey will end. We know about the resurrection and the ascension, about God, Son and Holy Spirit. And we know about the Cross. About how those seated on the left and the right of Jesus were common criminals, tortured to death in public, just as he was.

But in our lives today, it’s highly unlikely that following Jesus will get us spit upon, flogged and killed (Mark 10:34). Standing in the dust and heat on the side of the Jerusalem road, those words meant something, those words had blood in them.³ One thing we should fear is that because the

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975): 255.

² Lamar Williamson, Jr., Mark, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1983): 189.

³ Halford E. Luccock, “The Gospel According to St. Matthew: Exposition,” vol. 7 in *The Interpreter’s Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1951), 814.

risk of following Jesus has diminished, so has the value of saying you are able to share in Jesus' cup and baptism. Jesus has an answer for our fear, to pursue greatness by serving others, to be first by being a slave.

Jesus has an answer for our fear, but so do James and John. They're afraid. But they're on the Jerusalem road. They don't understand what Jesus is talking about. But they're still listening. Their relationship with Jesus is imperfect, but it is unbroken.⁴ Perhaps in addition to saying to God, "Here I am to worship, Here I am to bow down, Here I am to say that You're my God" we should add, "Here I am as a child of Zebedee."

⁴ Williamson, 193-194.